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ABSTRACT

Lack of success of some adult learners of English as a Second Language may be due to learning disabilities (LD). Review of research reveals that LD can affect every aspect of learning, impairing single or multiple skills and sometimes appearing in the second language when not in the first. Identification of adult ESL learners as having LD can be stigmatizing, and can be confused with other conditions or circumstances, including limited educational experience, lack of effective study habits, native language interference, mismatched learning and teaching styles, or external, personal problems. Standardized testing for LD learner assessment may be biased toward native English-speakers or younger learners, and multiple assessment measures are preferable. These include a native-language interview, portfolio assessment, phonological tests, and vision and hearing screening. Instruction should be highly structured and predictable, include opportunities for using several senses and learning strategies, provide constant structure and multisensory review, build on learner strengths, simplify language but not content, and reinforce main ideas and concepts through rephrasing. Use of technology in this area is not well documented. Two programs funded to research assessment and teaching techniques for this population are in Arlington, Virginia and Minneapolis, Minnesota. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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ESL Instruction for Learning Disabled Adults

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The lack of success some adults experience in learning may be due to learning disabilities (Lowry, 1990; Osher & Webb, 1994). An Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities identifies persons of average or above average intelligence who encounter significant difficulties with listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities or with social skills as learning disabled (Langner, 1993, Osher & Webb, 1994). Little is known about how these disabilities affect adults studying English as a second language (ESL).

This digest looks at what *is* known about learning disabilities and adult ESL learners, and addresses the following questions: How do learning disabilities affect the progress of adults learning English? How can learning disabled adults be identified and assessed? What kinds of instructional methods work best with this population? What kind of preparation is needed for teachers who work with them?

Learning Disabilities and Second Language Learning

Learning disabilities can affect every aspect of learning. They may impair multiple skills and abilities or they may impair only one. For example, difficulties with spelling may affect learners' writing skills, but not their reading skills. Learners may show learning disabilities in their second language yet not in their first. Often a subtle learning disability in the first language is masked by an individual's compensatory strategies (e.g., getting general information about what is said or written through the overall context when specific words or concepts are not understood or substituting known words for words that cause difficulty). However, these strategies may not be available to the learner in the new language (Ganschow & Sparks, 1993; Lowry, 1990).

Identifying ESL Adults with Learning Disabilities

It is difficult to determine how many adult ESL learners have learning disabilities. Estimates of the total U.S. adult population who are learning disabled range from as low as 3% to as high as 80% (Langner, 1993; Lowry, 1990; McCormick, 1991; Osher & Webb, 1994). The percentage of learning disabled students in adult education classes may exceed that of the population as a whole (Lowry, 1990). It is not known, however, if this is true in adult ESL classes.

The process of identifying anyone—adult, child, native English speaker, or ESL learner—as learning disabled can be stigmatizing (McCormick, 1991). Therefore, educators stress weighing the advantages of identifying adults as learning disabled (making them eligible for special instruction, resources, and services) against the possible stigma of the label (Lowry, 1990).

Before identifying an adult as learning disabled, other reasons for lack of expected progress should be considered.

- Limited previous educational experience may hinder progress in learning, that is, lack of exposure to classroom behaviors (using a pencil, repeating after a teacher, "reading" from a chalkboard, etc.) may be new and difficult for the learner with little or no prior schooling.
- The lack of effective study habits may cause problems in learning.
- The interference of a learner's native language may complicate the process of learning English. (For example, the spelling problems of an Arab student might be explained by the change in alphabet from Arabic to English; his slow reading by the change of direction in reading.) In fact, some of the problems of learning disabled language learners may be similar to those of all students beginning to learn a second language. However, with the non-disabled learner, these problems should lessen over time.
- A mismatch between the instructor's teaching style and the learner's expectations of how the class will be conducted may slow progress in learning the language.
- External problems with work, health, and family may account for lack of progress in the second language classroom.

Assessing the Learner

Using standardized tests to identify learning disabilities presents problems: First, instruments designed to diagnose learning disabilities are usually normed on native English speakers. Therefore, the results cannot be reliably used with learners whose first language is not English. Portions of some tests can give a clear idea of a learner's strengths and weaknesses, but simple scores based on a whole test are not always reliable. Because the concepts and language being tested may have no direct translation, the validity of tests translated into the native language is questionable. Second, the tests are primarily designed for and normed on *younger* students and may not be suitable for adults (Lowry, 1990). Finally, since no single assessment technique is sufficient to diagnose a learning disability, multiple assessment measures (including the following) are necessary.

- An interview in the native language can provide invaluable information about the learner's previous educational experience in English and in the native language, it can alert programs to learner expectations for classroom instruction, and it can provide insight into the learner's functioning in the first language (Ganschow & Sparks, 1993; Learning Disabilities Association, 1994).
- Portfolio assessment—in which measurements of learner progress in reading and writing are considered along with attendance data, writing samples, autobiographical information, and work on class assignments—is favored in many programs because its variety of input provides a broad picture of the learner's performance (Wrigley, 1992).
- Phonological tests (that could include auditory discrimination exercises assessing the learner's ability to distinguish between vowel sounds or between nonsense words) may suggest difficulties

the learner could experience with sound-related aspects of the language (Ganschow & Sparks, 1993).

- Visual screening and routine hearing tests may prove that what appear to be reading or listening and speaking disabilities may be due, in part, to correctable auditory or visual problems (McCormick, 1991).

Instructional Methods and Materials

Learning disabilities affect learning in any language and must therefore be a guiding factor in designing instruction for adult learners with disabilities. Educators of learning disabled children and adults (Baca & Cervantes, 1991; Ganschow & Sparks, 1993; Lowry, 1990) give the following suggestions for providing instruction.

- Be highly structured and predictable.
- Include opportunities to use several senses and learning strategies.
- Provide constant structure and multisensory review.
- Recognize and build on learners' strengths and prior knowledge.
- Simplify language but not content; emphasize content words and make concepts accessible through the use of pictures, charts, maps, timelines, and diagrams.
- Reinforce main ideas and concepts through rephrasing rather than through verbatim repetition.

Technology can help adult learners with learning disabilities to acquire a second language, but its use is not well documented. Raskind and Scott (1993) discuss the use of electronic aids for this population. Devices such as personal computers, hand-held translators and dictionaries, personal data keepers, and cassette recorders are useful as are more sophisticated learning tools such as speech synthesizers and reading machines that allow learners to hear as well as see what is displayed on the computer. Also recommended are televisions with closed-caption capabilities and VCR decoding devices that transcribe and project spoken dialogue on the screen. (See Parks, 1994, for discussion of the use of VCR decoding devices with adult ESL learners.)

Teacher Training for Instruction and Assessment

In elementary and secondary level ESL programs, the need for teachers trained in both ESL and special education has been recognized for some time, and various teacher training models team ESL instructors and special education instructors (Baca & Cervantes, 1991). In adult basic education and adult ESL, where less time and money are available for program capacity building through research and teacher training, there are fewer models to look to. However, two programs have been funded to do research on adult ESL learners with learning disabilities.

- The Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP) has received a grant from the Virginia Adult Educators Research Network to explore ways teachers can assist adult ESL students who may be learning disabled to acquire and retain basic literacy in a learner-centered classroom or computer lab. Through the use of a combination of standardized assessment tools, portfolio assessment, and narrative case studies of students who do not make expected progress, REEP hopes to find a few specific techniques that benefit not only students with learning disabilities, but all students in the program (L. Terrill, personal communication, January 3, 1995).
- The Learning Disabilities Association (LDA) in Minneapolis, in a project funded by the Minnesota Department of Education and Medtronics, Inc., used a combination of measures at the Lehmann ABE center to assess adult ESL learners who were suspected of having learning disabilities. The assessment included some standardized tests—the Basic English Skills Test (BEST), the Learning Styles Inventory, a phonics inventory, and the Test of Non-verbal Intelligence-R (Toni-R)—as well as some alternative assessment—learner observations by teachers and learning disabilities specialists, and native language writing samples and interviews. Project findings suggest that learning disabled adult ESL students benefit most when learning disabilities specialists and ESL teachers work together to plan instruction that is individualized, multisensory, phonics-based, and delivered in an environment where the learner is comfortable—generally the regular classroom (LDA, 1994).

Conclusion

As the extent of learning disabilities in the adult ESL population becomes more evident, training in issues and instructional methods related to learning disabilities will need to be part of professional development for all adult ESL educators. Research leading to the development of guidelines for assessment and instruction must be funded. Broader cooperation among the fields of ESL, adult education, and special education should ensure that the instructional needs of learning disabled ESL adults are being met.

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